WAR AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE UNION 1861-1972

by F. E. Vandiver

Karl von Clausewitz once observed that a nation will fight a war in a way dictated by its social system. Militarist regimes presumably will organize professional military ventures; democratic regimes, democratic military ventures. Obviously the generalization is subject to the limits of all generalizations, but it has some validity. Clausewitz spoke of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the United States may offer the best case study of his thesis. American wars have always had a curiously American quality.

From the colonial wars through the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War, Americans were probably the most individualistic soldiers in the field. They soon developed an irritating tradition of initiative, shared a passion for good shooting, and had a special spirit. Doubtless the militia system contributed to the independence of America's troops—most of them were temporary soldiers serving just long enough to make home safe for families and neighbors. But the structure of the country contributed something to the spirit of the martial forces. Young, zealous, eager for world acceptance, America strove for importance with a zest dormant in older countries. Hope and optimism mixed with boorish truculence distinguished the Yankees.

A loosely knit union was presided over by a loosely knit federal system, reflecting the individualist American character. Powers reserved were more important than powers conferred. Presidents governed by consent and by personal suasion. Voices of centralism, such voices as those of Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall, were few and often drowned out by the prevailing Jeffersonian sentiment, "that government is best which governs least." So it was not surprising that the army, and especially the militia, were loosely knit. Officers were listened to, obeyed when they appeared to be right, but ignored when the situation demanded. Proud men who worked for

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Mr. Vandiver is Harris Masterson, Jr., Professor of History at Rice University.

themselves expected to fight for themselves, and frequently knew more about fighting in the woodlands than did gilded dandies from the drillfield. Leadership was a common trait—sometimes too common!

Early American conflicts appear to have had little direct effect on the nature of the country, but the national character continued to affect war. Even the so-called "imperialistic" adventure in Mexico in the 1840's was more a reflection of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny than a creator of it. A new facet to conflict, however, can be seen in retrospect emerging from the Mexican War. Young graduates of West Point served effectively, helped to bring order out of staff chaos, and showed (to any who bothered to look) a new professional element in American armies. The army regulars had been the backbone of the Continental and 1812 legions—but professional officers were another matter. However, the implications of a growing officer cadre went unnoticed by all save professional soldiers. The union remained the same during and after the Mexican War, although its ambitions may have changed.

In 1861 the union was largely what it had been a dozen years before: a loosely knit collection of states, each jealous of its rights, and all presided over by a federal administration steeped in politics as the art of the possible and in power as a personal game. Sectionalism had appeared; the South lurked in increasing rancor behind fears, rumors, and a cotton curtain; the West focused on new lands in the Indian nations, traded with the South down the Mississippi and with the North by burgeoning lines of railroad. The North, expecially the northeast, cherished its own morally self-congratulatory Americanism, kept a cool trading eye to the sea, deplored the backwardness of the West, and scolded the South for the shame of slavery.

Arguments about the causes of the Civil War are endless and will continue; they are unimportant to the issue of war and union. What is important is the fact of war. It brought a shift of political realities not at first recognized, but real. In the North the old federal triangle of governmental branches functioning in amiable concert changed to a pyramid of power with the executive on top. By 1862 Abraham Lincoln had become a strong war president, ready to change the nature of his country to preserve its form. More surprisingly, the South underwent a similar shift.

Jefferson Davis was called by the Confederacy to preside over a country conceived in state rights and dedicated to individualism. Few men were more obviously qualified to lead a conservative reaction. Davis's entire career had been shaped in the shadow of John Calhoun; his thought, his temperament, his heart were dedicated to Southern rights, the protection of slavery, and the dignity of land, tradition, and lineage. Had history permitted him to follow his heart, it would have assured him greatness. But history made him a man alien to his time, cast him against the truest product of the age, and

so doomed him to a loser's mite. He deserves far more than that, for he did what few can manage; he changed himself entirely to fit the presidency. Lincoln grew with his job, as all attest; Davis took on another character, and wore it well. He became an advocate of hard war, of organization, of sublimated individualism. Against strident state rights governors the Confederate President waged a campaign of nationalism – to the point of urging conscription, impressment of private property, harsh taxation, restriction of cotton acreage, voluntary price controls, and finally the use of slaves as Southern soldiers.

Conscription worked its peculiar social alchemy in both Union and Confederacy. Urban sophisticates and city toughs, backwoods bumpkins and rustics mixed in the two armies until a different citizenry peopled north and south by the end of the war. Armies were more than human mixers, they were virtually insatiable consumers. Sustaining the armies caused some of the greatest changes in both warring nations.

Logistics is now a common noun. In the 1860's it was scarcely recognizable as English. But the science it describes—the arming, provisioning, healing, transporting, sheltering, clothing, paying of troops in the field—was understood as the housekeeping facet of the art of war. Such duties were done by well-established War Department staff officers: ordnance men, quartermasters, commissaries, medical officers. In previous wars, these activities had not involved the staffs or the country in especially stupendous activities, even in time of combat. But the Civil War demanded more than any previous war. Masses of men created mass demands for everything. Old techniques of supply were simply inadequate.

Both armies tried to cope with mass by mass. More men were added to the traditional staffs until bureaucracy created its own inertia. The demands increased relentlessly. Both nations knew the urgent and growing need of more food production, of expanding munitions factories, of new stocks of money and of men. The South suffered most because of its weakness. The urgency of mass tested the weakest first and forced President Davis and his administration to previously unknown methods of mobilization and deployment. A strongly democratic Southland metamorphosed, before the war ended, into a strongly organized power state with almost every sinew strained to sustain the armies. First the men went, then the silks, wines, salt, window sash weights, gold jewelry, family hunting guns, sabers from past wars, then hopes and ambitions—even the basis of the social order, slavery, stood jeopardized by the one great aim, independence.

Weakness had one virtue; it made innovation necessary. President Davis experimented with unique theories of geographical and theater

command in the field; he called on citizens for ideas and for improvements; and he expanded the civilian employee list of the central government until much of the war was run by a nascent civil service (an especially American concept of civil control of the military).

In the urge to help the armies, the South was forced into fundamental change, social, political, and economic. New business methods were tried in quartermaster activities—new accounting procedures, new warehousing methods, even new materials for shoes and clothing. New governmental methods were tested. The president, always an essentially private person, experimented with public suasion in frequent speeches and appearances. Virtually a second government was established in the Trans-Mississippi area, where a general presided over most civil and all military activities. Some things Davis could not do in the governmental sphere, among them declare martial law without recourse to Congress. He recognized that some constitutional forms had to be preserved, or there would be no reason for making war.

In the end, all of the innovation, all of the effort and devotion failed, and the South lost. But losing, itself, became an important innovation, an important precedent. Americans had never lost a war. Southern experience added to the totality of difference between sections. Certain things survived in the South; a tradition of duty "faithfully performed"; a sense of history; a veneration of heroes; some of the techniques in business and government that had been used during the conflict; and especially the independent spirit which made Rebel soldiers, in the words of a Federal general, "that incomparable infantry." These surviving elements were important, for they made reunion more possible than most people imagined. As the South had become a modest industrial state, as it had adopted much of the aura of its hated Leviathan neighbor, it had lurched into modern times, had approached accommodation with the methods and morals of the North.

All of the experiences of the South except defeat were shared by the North, and they were all magnified. Lincoln learned at last to use his power directly and effectively to mobilize the awesome resources of the United States and to aim them southward. When he found Ulysses Grant to use the North's resources, he had the combination for victory. But victory took long, bloody years, for it demanded the harnessing of untapped energies, demanded new tools and techniques and ideas. Victory required a vastly different Union. And when victory came at last at Appomattox the Union was markedly different from the amorphous thing of 1861.

Conscription, commandeering, harsh taxation, price controls, the use of Negro soldiers, and restriction of freedom of speech, press, and person, all had a part in victory. A nation passionately devoted to democracy became at least partially totalitarian by 1865. State governments were jealous of their

"rights," but subordinated some of them to the national purpose. The Federal courts sustained President Lincoln's war efforts through a series of important civil rights decisions. And yet the North was only partly touched by the war. Vast superiority of manpower, money, and all resources made it possible for the North to pursue the war while also carrying on the westward movement, the development of railroads, and the exploitation of virgin land. Meanwhile the South was bankrupted for generations.

In some ways the war soiled as it touched the North. Along with victorious columns scourging the South went carpetbaggers and Treasury Agents, minions of reform loosed to license, men whose new morality taught freedmen the lowest white politics and ideals. These "new men" set a tone for Reconstruction which rankles to this day. Yet they were transitory and the evils they did were overshadowed by the changes in the Union, changes that finally touched and included the South.

Even tied to the starveling South, the United States in 1865 stood on the threshold of world power unguessed and unknown. War had loosed its energies of mind and treasure, had given it ambitions and hungers beyond itself. From almost every standpoint, the Civil War may be called the "War of American Unification."

As such, the Civil War fitted into the pattern of the nineteenth century, a century rocked by conflicts of unification in Europe, South America, even Canada. Would the Civil War, like some of the other unification upheavals, lead to repression and increased totalitarianism, or would it lead to greater nationalism? The answer depended on the depth of political, economic, and social change effected during the war years.

Politically, the war settled a long-standing question of ultimate authority in the Union. President Lincoln's willingness to bend the Constitution, to take executive initiative when crisis demanded, his certainty that ends justified means, lent new power to his office. Rarely in the future would there be any question of who ran the country.

Under Lincoln, party development had languished. The Republicans, however, retained their structure and were able, in the Reconstruction era, to consolidate their dominant position in politics. Radicals took places of profit and precedence all over the South; they engineered much Federal action, and they possessed a sense of rectitude beyond the boundaries of their virtues.

Economically, the Republican Party showed during the war tendencies toward using Federal authority to benefit special interests, and in the years after the war the tendencies increased. National legislation fostered business and capital, and who would deny the right of this course? The nation prospered, all save the old Confederacy, and success was enlarged as a brand of Americanism.

Social changes brought by the war were harder to see—all save emancipation—but just as real as political and economic ones. The armies created a new democratic spirit; comradeship in blood sundered old class lines. Ability opened doors to many who would never have had a chance for achievement before the fighting. In the afterwar years ability mixed with success as touchstones to advancement. Accumulation of things showed ability; success could be quantified and a new ladder of acceptance was constructed. The Gilded Age glorified the rich and called them wellborn.

So it was possible to see in the aftermath of civil war a distressing trend toward the tawdry and the crass in America. But the image was false. Avarice may have guided some, greed may have twisted ambition in others, but America remained true to its promise of freedom. War taught Americans the horrors of carnage. Especially the South learned the lesson of a depleted, maimed, broken generation; the North shared in legions of armless, legless, limping veterans. On both sides of the old lines the fighting spirit ebbed.

American troops kept the field in tiny numbers. They fought on against the Indians; but these conflicts were remote, local, and of little impact on national life—distant "police actions" demanded by western settlers. Not until the 1890's did war fever burn in the country again. In 1898 President McKinley led the United States into war against Spain. Historians look back in laughter at the Spanish-American War, a misfit among conflicts, a Lilliputian venture by the American martial giant. At the time, though, laughter was rare.

The Spanish-American War may well deserve the label of the First Modern War, an epithet often reserved to the Civil War because of its trenches, weapons, strategies, and size. By comparison, the Spanish-American War lacked everything. But it was generated by propaganda, was waged in earnest anger against repressive Spain, set lasting precedents of policy, and took years to win.

The Cuban phase proved only a small part of the huge problem created by the war. Campaigning in Cuba had a hilarious quality of mismanaged athletics to it; the game was won finally by toughness and bravery right up front. But so unequal a contest scarcely counted as war. And considering Cuba alone, William Randolph Hearst's hope for a limited skirmish and a good hunting season seemed reasonable. With victory in Cuba, though, came victory in the Philippines over the hapless Spanish caretakers.

"Victory" in the Philippines turned into a nightmare of lingering guerilla warfare against Emilio Aguinaldo's patriots. The Filipinos had resisted the Spanish; they resisted American occupation in a continuing quest for independence. For almost a decade this wasting combat continued; casualties were a constant statistic in the annual report of the American Secretary of War. Finally "pacification" could be announced, but the cost might well be

reckoned prohibitive. The Philippine Insurrection, as it came to be known, tested the will of American occupying troops, taught them hard lessons in guerilla war and equally hard lessons in military-civilian relations.

For the Union, the Philippine Insurrection had some long-range implications. Experiences in the Far East whetted American appetite for a voice in that part of the world and helped to set Open Door views, but more than that, provided a precedent for colonial occupation policies.

A problem which constantly plagued American diplomats and military governors was whether or not the Constitution of the United States protected native populations. Did the Constitution follow the flag? In the Philippines, the answer apparently was yes *and* no. The Constitution protected and obligated occupiers, but local laws governed the occupied areas. This blend of American and native customs often proved admirable and set a tone of friendship rare between conquerors and conquered. It was an example of Yankee ingenuity and the essential goodwill of Americans. But not everything about the occupation was good, nor was everything about the new colonial system. Success in occupation may have been the worst defeat suffered by American forces. It made them satisfied and confident, even greedy. Success in Philippine relations gave a kind of "white man's burden" tone to later American colonial ventures. Americans did so well that they felt an obligation to uplift "deprived" peoples elsewhere. It was a human, though sad, urge.

Success in the Philippines had direct effect on the American economy. It opened much of the Far Eastern market, directed trade and people still further westward, and appeared to be the way toward endless prosperity. There were military results, too, worthy of note. The United States Army had won again, not easily, but it had won. American naval forces had had a decisive role in the Philippine war. If America wanted to keep her colonial empire, strong military forces were essential. The point was not lost on such Far Eastern advocates as Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. Under their careful eyes the United States Navy became a world force.

The legacy of the Spanish-American War was imperialism, a new sense of American mission, and a willingness to participate in world power politics. Once in the colonial game, America would not be shouldered out by lesser nations.

Imperialistic ideas affected a wide spectrum of people. Even archliberal Woodrow Wilson did not escape the spell. After he assumed the presidency in 1912, he launched a series of "involvements" around the Gulf and Caribbean which took U.S. Marines to many foreign shores as "regulators." Truly the purpose was to bring order out of local chaos, but such paternalism is resented. The trend of these island and Central

American intrusions was accelerated when trouble erupted between the United States and Mexico.

Revolutionary events in Mexico created havoc in U.S.-Mexican border areas. Bands of Mexican desperadoes plundered both sides of the boundary. Such raids were irksome but tolerable until, at last, a large bandit force—allegedly led by Pancho Villa—struck Columbus, New Mexico on March 16, 1916. Not only were townspeople terrorized, but a unit of the U.S. cavalry was embarrassingly surprised. Some sort of reply had to be made, and it took the form of the Punitive Expedition, led by General John J. Pershing.

As a reaction against insult, the Punitive Expedition proved remarkably mild. It was an intrusion permitted by the Mexican government, but it was nonetheless a disgusting Yankee violation of Mexican sovereignty. Pershing operated under the strongest prohibitions ever put upon an independent American commander, and he never violated them. Restricted to north-south roads, denied use of the railroads, dependent on local approval before entering Mexican towns, Pershing kept his temper, and hence possibly avoided war with Mexico—which was even more important than catching the elusive Villa.

Pershing and his men played another important role—testing American equipment for possible use in modern war. Airplanes, machine guns, field radios, motor trucks, all supported Pershing's campaign. Many of these newfangled additions to field operations proved worthless, others needed modifications.

Most obviously in need of modification was the creaking militia system. Thousands of national guardsmen were mobilized from far parts of the Union and sent to Texas in case of a real war. Getting these men in the field, transporting and feeding and equipping them, proved tasks beyond the competence or technique of guard logisticians. Scandals reminiscent of the Spanish-American War supply fiasco alarmed the country, and especially the War Department. Nothing about the mobilization process could be counted modern—all of it required improvement.

All of this rattled a nation looking with alarm at the huge European War. Since August 1914, countless thousands of Central Powers and Allied troops faced each other along more than four hundred miles of trenches from the Channel coast of France to the Franco-Swiss border. War in Europe had evolved into some monstrous unknown, a thing of mire and misery, without maneuver, without relief, even without hope. Men were consumed in ghastly quantities for no more reward than a few scarred acres or some useless reach of wire and gulch. Victory remained the aim of the contenders, but ways to win it were lost in a desperate craze for a "breakthrough"—somehow a breakthrough became congruent with winning. But the breakthrough never came. All that came was waste.

America looked on this gargantuan stalemate in horror. All traditions, all tokens of grace so long cherished by the old world were being ground away in a war that seemed likely to go on until only the dead remained. Hopes and beliefs were sloughing in a world tragically changed. America remained aloof under Wilson's leadership. He sought a way to mediate the war before it ruined humanity. But mediation works only when exhaustion lends it virtue, and neither contending side would admit exhaustion.

By the time Pershing crossed the last of his men back into Texas from Mexico in February 1917, relations between the United States and the Central Powers had deteriorated. Submarine warfare loomed as the great issue, along with the outrage of the Zimmerman Telegram. In April the United States declared war on Germany and her allies. Wilson tried every avenue of escape before he reluctantly accepted arms, but at length he was convinced that no other course lay open to America. He saw victory for the Central Powers as an end to freedom. America must fight for the heritage of western civilization.

World War I should rank as probably the greatest agent of change in the twentieth century. Every participating nation emerged from the war starkly different. Even neutrals did not escape the war's lasting effects.

Simply in terms of casualties the war changed the world. Ten million people were killed in or because of it; countless billions in treasure were poured into the conflict; an entire generation disappeared. There were subtler prices exacted by the war, prices of spirit. People had believed in progress and perfectibility before the fighting began; afterwards the prevailing mood was cynical and despairing.

Outwardly untouched, America suffered acutely from its brief involvement. More than a million "doughboys" journeyed to France. Thousands took part in the campaigns of late 1917 and 1918, and it was possible to believe that America had tipped the balance for Allied victory. But victory came at an awkward moment for the United States. It caught America almost in mid-stride. At a point of unfinished mobilization, at a time of mounting unity and fervor, just at the peak of patriotism, the war was over. Suddenly there was no need for unity, fervor, or patriotism. Peace brought an almost cruel letdown. Victory lacked savor.

Peace affected America in many things beyond spirit and attitude. The economy, geared to rising production of food and munitions, went awry with the sudden stoppage of demand. Farmers who had expanded their acreage in response to patriotic summons found themselves saddled with mortgaged lands and dwindling markets for crops. Industries found their new tooling almost useless for civilian production. Thousands who had worked in war plants were thrown abruptly out of work. A general recession set in, a recession of economy and will followed by reaction and fear.

A. Mitchell Palmer and the Red Scare set the tone of reaction. Uncertainty, disunity, lost purpose all made a new Native Americanism acceptable. Bolsheviks were conjured under myriad chairs and tables and the threat created an atmosphere of repression not unlike the era of the Alien and Sedition Acts. But these hysterical results of the war were temporary. Other results were lasting.

Logistics exploded to a new scale during World War I. Every participant had been forced to use new methods to supply millions of armed men. A steady sequence of supplies had to move to the Western Front and to the other scattered combat zones. Demands on national resources were tremendous and required new means of meeting them. Rationing of food and consumer goods, curtailment of international commerce, special war taxation, government control of the means of production and distribution were essential to the new logistics.

In America, the new logistics intruded government deeply into personal lives, and government never really got out again. Railroads were returned to private owners in time, rationing ended, commerce resumed, taxes were adjusted, but a new order of regimentation remained. The best evidence of this regimentation was an entirely new dimension of the Federal administration—the myriad boards, panels, and commissions which had been created to supervise munitions production, farm development, rationing, allocation of manpower and other critical materials. These adjuncts of federalism were the modern equivalent of the civilian employees of the Northern and Southern War Departments who helped run the Civil War. The "alphabet agencies" were different, however, in that they persisted and often made policy, even legislated through administrative decision, and so constituted a fourth dimension of government.

World War I pushed America to new heights of organization and power. When the war ended, the United States was unquestionably the strongest nation on earth. And in the twentieth century it proved impossible to elude the role of leadership fostered by strength. But America tried desperately to evade the inevitable.

Through the 1920's and into the '30's American diplomats either avoided foreign entanglements or worked to support disarmament and peace treaties. The carnage of 1914-1918 had disillusioned America more thoroughly than many guessed and led to rejection of force as an instrument of policy. This isolation syndrome was reinforced by the severe depression of 1929. All kinds of Americans sold apples, pins, needles, or ties on streetcorners, but veterans got the publicity. Countless pictures showed the old uniforms, frayed and patched, the thin faces of former heroes, faces that held fear for an unseen enemy. The war to make the world safe for Democracy appeared to have made it unsafe for humanity.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's advent on the political scene lifted the pall of inertia. His frenetic hundred days helped to restore confidence in government as an instrument of protection, and his programs of economic and social reform pointed toward national rejuvenation. The techniques he used to sustain his program were frequently inherited from the World War. The "alphabet agencies" were increased; the Civilian Conservation Corps had a distinctly militaristic form; the nation was enlisted in a crusade in which everyone "did his part."

In spite of FDR, or because of him, the depression faded and the United States resumed the path of progress. When World War II erupted in Europe in 1939, the United States was internally sound and externally weak.

After World War I, the armed forces went into limbo. Small standing units of the army and navy diminished through the depression budgets, and even FDR found little money to give them. If the United States became militarily involved again, its armed forces would have to build from nothing.

Some things were remembered from the hectic days of 1917. Voices for preparedness were raised, and in 1940 the United States adopted the Selective Service System—a remarkable peacetime departure from custom. Gradual preparations were made to expand the armed forces if necessary. Stockpiles of critical material were started. More than that, FDR worked actively to assist the Allies. The "destroyer deal" of 1940 which sent some old U.S. ships to the British indicated American sympathy with the Allied cause. But the country shrank from open involvement. Neutrality with bias seemed our best course—and it proved as difficult to maintain as in 1916 and 1917.

When in December 1941 Japan attacked the United States, Germany came to the aid of her ally and declared war on America. Unlike the situation in 1917, America was faced in 1941 with waging a two-front, global war. By that time American preparations had progressed far enough to permit orderly and fairly swift expansion. But such massive effort demanded energies and devotion not required in World War I. In the next four years, nearly thirteen million Americans joined the colors, thousands died or were wounded in battles that raged from Alaska to the Japanese home islands, from the Atlantic coast to Berlin. And when Germany and Japan surrendered in 1945, the United States once more ranked as the strongest nation on earth.

There were interesting parallels in America's postwar experiences in 1918 and 1945. Postwar depression of spirit marked both years; decisive military victory brought indecisive diplomacy; great unity gave way to disillusion and cynicism. In 1945 there was little thought of a world safe for democracy, but the goal of the war had been achieved; fascism faded as the blight of the world. Hitler and his henchmen joined history's toppled conquerors. The elimination of Hitler and Nazism made World War II clearly a *justum bellum* for America. Americans fight well in just wars; this is a facet of the American character.

Effects of World War II on the nature of the Union were remarkably similar

to the effects of World War I. The scope of governmental authority burgeoned; agencies multiplied; the economy grew and developed under careful management. Resources were found and exploited which were unknown before the war. New production methods transformed the munitions, aircraft, and shipping industries. Transportation entered a new era of speed and efficiency.

There were other disturbing parallels, especially in the erosion of idealism. Two world conflicts pretty well destroyed illusions of virtue. Society seemed a tissue of deceit and politics a system of exploitation. Force alone made right. A new Red Scare, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the Cold War set the tone of Post-World War II reaction. There were some American voices of hope, calling the United States to assume world leadership and so restore some idealism. Twice within twenty-five years the United States had gone to war to save the western world. No other nation had so clear a record of rectitude. No other nation could really exercise leadership. So the United States took on the difficult role of Superpower. It requires the cajoling, persuading, and humoring of fractious allies, the balancing of terror; but it is a role brought by war and which uses war as a deterrent.

So the Union has changed, because of conflict, from the loose-limbed corpus of 1861 to the modern structure of 1972. After World War II, the trends toward centralization seen after each of America's wars increased. The strength and organization generated by the two World Wars made possible the growth of the United States in wealth, success, and power, made possible the reasonably effortless "police action" in Korea (another *justum bellum* in the eyes of most Americans), and also made possible the far-flung imperial outposts of today. They made possible, too, the Viet Nam effort, which continues against heavy domestic opposition—perhaps because it is not demonstrably a *justum bellum.*

In 1945 the portents were evident that the United States stood on the threshold of world influence. Today it stands in the vortex of dominion because the union has changed to meet the challenge of force. Once a thing of localism and isolation, the Union now is a factory of power.

History may record the twentieth century as important for the changes in the Union; may record the century as developing three militarist superstates. If so, history will surely remark the curious blend of war and idealism that spans the career of the United States.